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Crisis Communication in the Context of Child and Youth Protection – Diagnosis, Problems, Challenges. The Case of the Catholic Church in Poland

Abstract

Crisis management principles that have been in place and proven for decades by commercial companies and corporations, tested at great expense, apply equally to all non-commercial entities, governmental, religious, political, as well as to individuals. There is no deviation from them, as crises in today's world are determined by the media, not the entity or institution itself. Every crisis can become an opportunity for change, strengthening, improvement, purification and even victory. The condition is a professional approach to the problem. A crisis can also be the beginning of the end, a failure. The biggest enemy of success in this situation is lack of knowledge how to act properly, mistakes in communication and management of resources. However, avoiding responsibility, hiding facts, manipulating information, being too quick and inconsiderate, resorting to falsehood, hypocrisy, and calculated behaviour will not facilitate success either. The article will analyse the institutional actions of the Catholic Church in Poland for the protection of children and adolescents in the context of the classical principles of crisis management applied in a crisis.

Keywords

crisis communication, PR, child and youth protection, paedophilia, Catholic Church, Poland.

The Roman Catholic Church in Poland, since 2013, began to communicate about the problem of paedophilia in an institutional way in a certain openness at the national level.¹ The national media contributed to addressing the topic of paedophilia in the Church in the country by publishing materials about the activities covering the issue of abuse of minors, conducted in some dioceses in Poland. The communication of the Roman Catholic Church was dominated by the terminology of “zero tolerance” for paedophilia, guidelines for the Church in Poland were introduced, a coordinator was appointed on behalf of the Polish Bishops’ Conference, priests in almost all dioceses in Poland were trained, and many other preventive and educational activities were undertaken. However, the secular media narrative is critical of the Church’s actions. The feature film “Kler”, as well as two films by the Sekielski brothers “Just Don’t Tell Anyone” [“Tylko nie mów nikomu”] and Hide-and-Seek [“Zabawa w chowanego”], premiere March 28, 2020, in addition to the announced premiere of the 3rd film about John Paul II in the context of the problem of paedophilia, provoke a discussion lasting in the media for more than four years (previews of the film “Kler” were published in the spring of 2018). In March 2019, data on the Church in Poland was revealed and presented in an unprecedented way for this kind of situation. At the press conference, which was a mistake and an escalation of the crisis, attended by 7 clergymen, the bishops did not speak with one voice, 3 different positions and 3 different concepts of approaching the problem were visible. The whole event was unprepared.² The announced report was only a compilation, without a clear discussion of the methodology of data collection,³ without going

¹ In June 2013, the plenary assembly of the Polish Bishops’ Conference appointed Jesuit Fr. dr Adam Żak as coordinator for the protection of children and young people. Cf. *Kościół wobec grzechu i przestępstwa pedofilii*, <https://episkopat.pl/kosciol-wobec-przestepstwa-pedofilii/> (03.02.2022).

² P. Guzik, *An Unfinished Story of Conversion: Clerical Sexual Abuse in Poland. A Communications Case Study on Betrayal, Healing and Trust Recovery*, “Church, Communication and Culture” 5 (2020) 3, pp. 417–455.

³ *Wykorzystywanie seksualne osób małoletnich przez niektórych inkardynowanych do diecezji polskich duchownych oraz niektórych profesów wieczystych męskich zgromadzeń*

deeper into the problem in the study; there was, however, the rhetoric of defending the Church and showing mercy to the perpetrators, adopted by Archbishop Marek Jędraszewski.⁴

The communication activity of the Polish Bishops' Conference was also influenced by various political actors and entities, including the activity of the "Do not be afraid" Foundation [Fundacja "Nie lękajcie się"], the creation of the project of an interactive map of paedophilia, the visit of the president of the foundation to the Vatican, posing as a victim of a paedophile priest and being kissed on the hand by Pope Francis in the flash of journalistic flashes. The institutional communication activities of the Catholic Church on the paedophilia case have its narrative in the secular media. The article will analyse the institutional actions of the Catholic Church in Poland for the protection of children and adolescents in the context of the classical principles of crisis management applied in a crisis. Thus an attempt will be made to determine the state of the institutional communication of the Church in Poland in the field of paedophilia and the media resonance of the actions taken.

1. Crisis as a predictable reality

Rapid changes in social communication create a number of challenges in the everyday life of companies and institutions. Tabloidization of the news, rush, the language of emotions, devaluation of values, the ever-increasing role of social media, false information and hate speech – these are just some of the problems that these entities face. They are also often the causes of crisis situations. Institutions and companies then experience communication chaos and the complexity of information management, destabilization of procedures and shortcomings in resource management. The specificity of a turning point, which undoubtedly is a crisis, is best described by the Chinese in the concept of *wej-ji*, consisting of two characters – "danger" and "opportunity." It suggests that the crises faced by modern people, institutions and companies can be a source of challenges,

zakonnych i stowarzyszeń życia apostołskiego w Polsce. Wyniki kwerendy, p. 5. Full text: https://cod.ignatianum.edu.pl/images/Dokumente_w_PDF/ISKK_Wyniki_Kwerendy_opracowanie_final.pdf (15.01.2022).

⁴ D. Tworzydło, S. Gawroński, M. Zajic, *Catholic Church in Poland in the Face of Paedophilia. Analysis of Image Actions*, "European Journal of Science and Theology" 5 (2020) vol. 1, pp. 157–172.

new spaces, opportunities and new realities. A state of destabilization can also be the basis for new systems of understanding, self-awareness, and can contribute to rediscovering concepts, actions, and events that have started to seem superfluous and to creating new initiatives or filling old concepts with new content. It all depends on how one gets out of difficulties, because chaos is the greatest enemy of success.

Every crisis can become an opportunity for change, strengthening, improvement, purification and even victory.⁵ The condition is a professional approach to the problem. A crisis can also be the beginning of the end, a failure, a force destroying resources, even leading to bankruptcy or serious financial problems. The biggest enemy of success in this situation is lack of knowledge how to act properly, mistakes in communication and management of resources. However, avoiding responsibility, hiding facts, manipulating information, being too quick and inconsiderate, resorting to falsehood, hypocrisy, and calculated behaviour will not facilitate success either. Such a situation took place in the case of the crisis of sexual abuse and manipulation carried out in the youth ministry in Wrocław by a Dominican friar, followed by many years of covering up the matter by successive provincials of the order and finally the beginning of investigation after the media publications in March 2021 in the pages of “Więź”.⁶ Only then did the provincial of the Dominicans initiate the canonical proceedings in the case of Fr. Paweł M. Only then did the wronged persons experience the possibility of effectively reporting their wrongs and after many months the signing of a financial settlement with some of them began in December 2021.

Resolution of the crisis depends on the timing and manner in which institutions respond to emerging difficulties.⁷ A difficult situation requires not only the right response, but also quick determined decisions by the institution’s management to rectify it, as well as the ability to communicate them to the internal (employees) and external environment (clients, contractors, institutions, etc.). Such a swift decision was made by the Primate of Poland, Archbishop

⁵ M. Friedman, *Everyday crisis management: How to think like an emergency physician*, Naperville 2002, p. 5.

⁶ See also the series of documented articles on similar topics by Zbigniew Nosowski (written in “Więź” from 2019) <https://wiesz.pl/author/zbigniew-nosowski/> (03.02.2022).

⁷ M. Collins, S. Hollins, *Leczenie ran w sercu Kościoła i społeczeństwa*, w: *Ku uzdrowieniu i odnowie. Materiały z sympozjum dla biskupów i przełożonych zakonnych o seksualnym wykorzystaniu osób niepełnoletnich*, Papieski Uniwersytet Gregoriański, 6–9 lutego 2012, Kraków 2012, pp. 47–62.

Wojciech Polak⁸ immediately after the publication of the second part of the Sekielskis' film, notifying the Holy See of the serious negligence of one of Poland's bishops in May 2020. He announced it through the media the same day after the film's release.

It is also important to have previously developed procedures for managing the institution in crisis situations.⁹ It is also necessary during a crisis to professionally communicate the reasons for the emergence of difficulties, the course of the situation itself and events, and to explain decisions and actions to various groups of the institution's environment, as well as to inform about plans. Admittedly, there are documents¹⁰ on the protection of children and young people in the face of the problem of paedophilia in the Church, the "Guidelines of the Polish Bishops' Conference" – procedure when a clergyman is accused of a sin/crime of sexual abuse of a minor, or Pope Francis' "Motu proprio *You are the Light of the World*" – procedure for holding Church superiors accountable – but this procedure is not fully implemented in many Church institutions.¹¹

2. Trust and credibility¹²

Crises erupt suddenly. However, most of them can be predicted and prepared for. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to review all curial files in the archives, to carry out professional monitoring of the press about the cases described in the press, to initiate explanatory proceedings, to observe all documents approved by the Apostolic See and the Polish Bishops' Conference and to bring the proceedings

⁸ In 2019, he was elected by the plenary assembly of the Polish Bishops' Conference as the institution's delegate for the protection of children and young people.

⁹ U. Khattab, S.B. Fonn, S. Ali, *Strategic communication management of corporate crises: Case analysis*, "e-Journal of Social & Behavioural Research in Business" 8 (2017) 1, p. 16.

¹⁰ Cf. Polish Bishops' Conference, *Kościół wobec grzechu i przestępstwa pedofilii* (official documents), <https://episkopat.pl/kosciol-wobec-przestepstwa-pedofilii/> (03.02.2022).

¹¹ D. Cahil, P. Wilkinson, *Child Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church: An Interpretive Review of the Literature and Public Inquiry Reports*, Melbourne 2017, p. 89–90. Full text: <https://www.rmit.edu.au/content/dam/rmit/-documents/news/church-abuse/child-sex-abuse-and-the-catholic-church.pdf>.

¹² M. Przybysz, *Kościół w kryzysie? Crisis management w Kościele w Polsce*, Tarnów 2008, pp. 83–88.

to a conclusion. Then nothing will be surprising, further media publications will not arise in a given entity, and no further scandals will break out.

Crises, on the other hand, have their space to grow in the media, especially on the Internet. When you go through a crisis in the real world, you can be sure that it will hit the Web very quickly. The question is not “if” but “when” it will happen.

If there are no procedures in place to protect children and young people in an institution, a crisis is bound to happen. One such example was the provocation of journalists from “Tygodnik Podhalański” who decided to call the retreat houses of the Dehonians, Missionaries of Our Lady of La Salette, and Verbites trying to book a room for a priest and an altar boy. From May to September, the journalists called other centres, slightly modifying their proposals. Also the Lagiewniki Sanctuary was not left out and the person answering the phone had no problem with booking a room for a priest and a 13-year-old girl. All this happened after the premiere of the second part of the Sekielskis’ film concerning sexual abuse of minors by clergymen. Some tension was added by the visit of Archbishop Scicluna to Poland in June 2019, famous for his unequivocal stance against paedophilia, after whose visit to Chile one country the entire Episcopate resigned.

This time-related plane can be partially influenced. It is also possible to prepare oneself well, to manage the activities professionally, to strengthen the sense of efficiency, to show the efficiency of the entity, to build credibility and trust among various groups of the organization’s environment, which is something extremely important in a crisis. These two values must be communicated within an extremely short period of time, at various stages and through various actions. It is best to do it as quickly as possible, but not to make any mistakes, so not too quickly. Relationships take a long time to build. However, it pays off to do it. Credibility is lost quickly and for a very long time, sometimes only once, without the possibility of restoring it.

3. Ethics of crisis communication

Three ethical principles apply in a crisis situation: truthfulness, openness and partnership. Adherence to these principles can be considered one of the conditions for successful crisis management and containment. “Talk fast and about everything” – this statement coined in the circles of public relations specialists

refers to the openness of communication from the first moments of the crisis. For, according to some researchers, the attitude of the environment to a difficult situation is resolved within 2 hours; according to others within 3–4 hours; according to other opinions between 45 minutes and several hours. Paul Skrivastow many years ago formulated the thesis of a “window of opportunity,” because each crisis allows you to open a window (opportunity) through which you can control it, but it is possible in a limited time.¹³ It is necessary to use all technical means to disseminate information, so that the media message is not the fruit of speculation, but the official position of the entity. The principle of extremely fast response is very important. According to Lithium Technologies research, 14% of users expect an immediate response from the brand, 19% within 5 minutes to 30 minutes, 20% want a response between 30 and 60 minutes, and 47% will accept responses between 60 and 120 minutes.¹⁴

The second principle of truth, honesty, communication transparency and openness in a crisis situation is fundamental. It is about the credibility of the message and the response of the community. A community that believes in the entity’s information and good intentions, professionalism and desire to resolve the situation – responds with support. When journalists or individuals detect a lie, an attempt to manipulate, to hide something, it results in a lack of trust, condemnation, judgment, recognition of guilt.

The third ethical rule concerns partner treatment of the environment – the other side of communication process. The dialogue should be conciliation-oriented. The way of communication should be deprived of position of infallibility, being unquestionably right, superior and in possession of the absolute truth. The emotional character of the other party’s message, the other party’s feelings, even irrational ones, should be taken into account.

Crisis communication will be effective, i.e. will be heading towards positive solutions, when the source of information is reliable, honest, composed, giving facts in a subdued way and cooperating.

¹³ R. Cohn, *The PR Crisis Bible: How to Take Charge of the Media When All Hell Break Loose*, New York 2000, p. 10.

¹⁴ A. Gesenhues, *Study: 72% Of Consumers Expect Brands To Respond Within An Hour To Complaints Posted On Twitter*, <https://martech.org/study-72-of-consumers-expect-brands-to-respond-within-an-hour-to-complaints-posted-on-twitter/> (02.02.2022).

4. Crisis as a *signum temporis*

The Church, functioning in positive opposition to the world, has often gone through smaller or larger identity crises. It has survived internal conflicts, splits, divisions and difficulties, it has survived the schism and the Reformation, proclaiming the unchanging message of the Gospel and formulating theological thought in the midst of discussion and polemics. It is a theandric, divine-human institution, guarding the deposit of faith entrusted to it, in the face of the external world and the threats arising from various cultural-religious-social transformations. It enters into dialogue with other religions, sects and denominations. It enriches the reflection on its own identity, the process of inculturation, including the content of the message, but also the ways of proclaiming the Gospel. Currently, the Church in Poland is struggling not only with the pandemic, the problem of the return of the faithful to parishes, but also with the problem of paedophilia, communicated many times in different media and in different contexts, with the consequences of events related to the verdict of the Constitutional Tribunal and many other social, moral, political and economic challenges. Crises have been, are and will be a constant part of the life of the Church. Some of them are related to the proclamation of the unchanging Deposit of Faith, some to actions concerning social problems, such as vaccination, in the context of statements by the Church's Teaching Office on these issues, and some to internal changes, such as Pope Francis' *Motu proprio* "Traditionis custodes" (Latin: Guardians/custodians of Tradition), in which he rescinded the permissions, norms and customs associated with the so-called "Tridentine Mass."

A crisis can be an opportunity and it can be the beginning of the end. Nowadays, nothing can be concealed, one cannot naively hope that a crisis will pass by itself without reacting to it and communicating with the media and other persons and institutions. The institution's press officer plays an important role in this communication. And this may be the spokesman of a diocese, a religious order, a Caritas branch, a care and educational institution, but also a parish. In fact, several parishes in Poland have their own press officer. It is not only about speaking out in difficult and extreme situations, but it is also about creating a positive image of a given institution in the media in order to prevent crises. Such a positive narrative was adopted by Bishop of Warsaw-Praga Romuald Kamiński in 2018 when the media pressured the Polish Bishops' Conference to publish data on paedophilia cases in the Church in Poland. The first bishop to release the data on September 17, 2018, without waiting for it to be collected

throughout Poland, was Bishop Piotr Libera of Płock. However, the announcement was mostly about an attitude of repentance, apologizing and giving the numbers. In addition to these actions, the Bishop of Warsaw-Praga also published one of the first complete documents in Poland in the form of “guidelines” for his diocese on the protection of children and young people.¹⁵ This proactive approach, supported by the organization of a press conference on September 27, 2018, was recognized in publications that were informative and neutral even in media unfavourable to the Church.

5. Information management

In crisis situations, but also in times of stability, it is useful to have a coherent information policy and an information management strategy in every Church institution, regardless of its size. It is not only reactive, crisis communication that often depends on proactive communication, conducted in a successive and regular manner in “normal” time with different groups of the environment. Also important are relations with other entities, internal information management, the effectiveness of creating information in the media, reaching with it the groups of the environment relevant from the point of view of the institution, as well as the role it plays in society.

The biggest challenge today in coming out of various crisis situations is to resolve the essence of the crisis. For this to be possible, mentalities and habits must be changed. It is necessary to approach the subject professionally, despite the current turmoil. No communication measures will suffice without taking long-term decisions. In the case of the problem of paedophilia, these changes concern the protection of children and young people from abuse by clergy, but very well prepared documents, clear actions of some bishops who unambiguously implement the guidelines of the Polish Bishops’ Conference, educational actions of the Centre for Child Protection from Krakow, and press conferences are not enough. There are many unresolved issues from the past whose resolution does not depend solely on the Church. The media in such situations are merciless to the institution of the Church, and additionally, some circles in the Church also do not have a common opinion on this matter. Some clergy continue

¹⁵ *Normy ochrony dzieci i młodzieży oraz zasady praktyk duszpasterskich w Diecezji Warszawsko-Praskiej*, <https://diecezja.waw.pl/plik.php?name=31502.pdf> (02.02.2022).

to perpetrate decision-making, communication and human errors, retraumatizing the wronged. There is a lack of empathy, commitment, compassion, empathy, sometimes also wisdom and prudence.¹⁶

The process of cleansing the Church of the sin of paedophilia, negligence, concealment of perpetrators, looking down on the victims, is underway. Some circles perceive the actions cleansing the Church from the dark pages of the past as an attack on the Church. In all this a question arises among many priests: how can one do anything today when a priest wants to preach the Gospel and is questioned about paedophilia? How to focus on evangelizing activities of the rapidly and severely secularizing society? How to take a number of actions to activate the lay faithful? How to deal with the aggression of a part of the society, regularly fuelled by the message of some media? How to get out of the impasse of great concern for the quality of catechization conducted in schools by deeply believing priests, so that it would be at the highest level, evangelizing, full of catechists' testimony of faith? How to simultaneously meet the accusations of the media and environments hostile to the Church about the passivity of the hierarchy, about wrong decisions, about the entanglement of the Church in politics?

6. News is emotions

Today new information is still the news, but also is the one evoking emotions: smile, joy, indignation, sadness, sympathy, fear, etc. ("news feed fears"). It is also news when something is a deviation from normality, unusual and unique, also extreme. It may be information or an event that is very sad, very funny, serious, revealed against the efforts of others, controversial, conflictual, etc. And above all, news is something that is important to a large group of people. Such institutions as the Church, Social Security, government, parliament, etc. will, after all, always arouse interest. And the larger the group in which an institution arouses emotion, the more vulnerable it is to crisis.

Apart from emotions, crises escalate under the influence of mistakes, not negative events. The biggest crises are a string of wrong decisions and

¹⁶ J. Kloch, *Zasady występowania duchownych w mediach według Konferencji Episkopatu Polski*, in: A. Graczyk, K. Marcyński, M. Przybysz (eds.), *Media w transformacji*, Warszawa 2013, pp. 123–131.

communications. It is not the event itself that has a negative impact on reputation, but the way you react. The primary image task in a crisis is to avoid the role of “someone bad.” An institution or a company becomes a “bad character” in a crisis in two situations – when it is aggressive and arrogant and in the situation of opposition towards the wronged people. Therefore, you need to be prepared for a crisis so that you can react quickly and respond appropriately. Noah started building the ark before it started raining. And yet so many people mocked him by calling him unflattering names. Archbishop Grzegorz Ryś was too quick to publish his statement concerning the accusations of one of the newspapers, revealing the name of the person who had been sexually abused by a priest and at the same time anonymising the data of the perpetrator. He apologized for this action in a subsequent communication on September 2, 2020, but such a mistake is inexplicable, since it causes secondary retraumatization of the victim.

In order to get out of a difficult situation, it is necessary to understand the nature of crises, know the “blind alleys” and mistakes that are repeated over and over again, and create procedures that will prevent such situations in the future. One must prepare for the crisis. And also equip Church entities with communication tools such as crisis audit, crisis book, crisis survival kit, e-crisis manual, trainings and simulations.

7. Proximity in the situation of injustice

The key element in managing communication in a crisis is to be on the side of and as close as possible to the injured and wronged persons. This is in contrast to the corporate position sometimes taken by Church institutions, which “is simply right” and communicates it in an “arrogant” way when confronted with the harm done to the affected people. Today, the media sells emotion in place of information. While one may ethically disagree and protest against this, this is what the media look like today and they set the rules of the game.

Casting the institution of the Church in the role of an evil character unfortunately ends the chance for a positive resolution of the crisis without image losses, which then translate into other losses, including financial, human resources, time, emotional ones, etc. The first moments after the crisis, communication and giving interpretation to facts and events are extremely important. It is important to help people understand what has happened before they form their own opinions about who is at fault, who is complicit. Empathy, sensitivity,

gentleness, feeling, sympathy for the injured, taking care of them from every possible angle – first of all communication-wise,¹⁷ and if necessary, concerning health, psychology, pastoral care, finances – these are the basics of efficient crisis management.

In many difficult situations, aggrieved persons do not plan and do not have financial claims. Language is important, like, for example, not using the word “victim”. No one ever wants to be called that, and you need to be careful about the wording used for those who are wronged. Many people who approach Church institutions with a report of sexual abuse by a clergyman or religious person need to have their story and situation heard, listened to, believed. And they also want the abuser to be banned from approaching children. Denying, negating, undermining the aggrieved persons’ credibility and often humiliating them and looking “down” create a situation of their feeling rejected, not believing their story. Their hurt builds up and sometimes they try to shake the people in charge of the institution. Sometimes they go to the media to tell their story to get publicity. Then the Church as an institution in the eyes of the wronged does not appear as a field hospital for the sick, but as a heartless institution and “inhuman” corporation. Crisis is a theatre of emotions, and yet solving a crisis often requires silence. It is easier to manage it by being prepared.

8. Crisis book

A crisis is a fragment of reality which confronts an institution with various groups of people who are surprised by the course of events, moved by ongoing incidents, or even horrified by the manifestation of facts and sequences of events. Through a piece of episodic crisis reality, the institution is often seen as a whole. Media coverage of a crisis situation is perceived by the public, consuming hot media in a hurry, as the representation of normal practice in these entities, and many employees experience the burden of being identified with the chaos-afflicted entity which is the source of the problems. In a crisis, the organizational efficiency of an institution is verified, procedures are tried

¹⁷ Cf. Polish Bishops’ Conference, *Bądźmy wrażliwi na bezpieczeństwo dzieci i młodzieży. Stanowisko Konferencji Episkopatu Polski w sprawie ochrony dzieci i młodzieży* (9.10.2013), <https://episkopat.pl/badzmy-wrazliwi-na-bezpieczenstwo-dzieci-i-mlodziezy-stanowisko-konferencji-episkopatu-polski-w-sprawie-ochrony-dzieci-i-mlodziezy/> (03.02.2022).

and tested, and resources – human, material, as well as the potential for development – are put to the test. However, the companies and institutions that emerge from the crisis strengthened are those that have prepared for it and have adequate resources to solve it. Referring to Sun-Tzu's "Art of War" principle: "battles are won before the battle", also here an essential role is played by the important department of crisis communication management, and therefore proactive actions, as opposed to reactive actions, which are necessary to be taken during a difficult situation.

Creating operating procedures comes fairly easily when mandated by law. A clearly defined health and safety policy, a RODO manual in the parish office and other Church entity – will be somehow annoying, but nonetheless it must be complied with. A valuable optional but useful tool is a crisis book. It should describe all procedures related to dealing with a difficult situation from the communication side. The book created for a given organization or institution should also be updated – preferably once every six months, checking what has changed in human, financial, organizational, logistic resources, etc.

In the book of procedures it is worth including the area of competence of individual links of the information flow system. It is a good idea to indicate who (with their name and surname together with a contact to this person) undertakes what tasks and actions and who replaces this person in case of absence due to personal reasons, health, vacations or other unexpected events. A procedure should also be included for who represents the institution in contact with the media and in what situations. In crisis books it is also worth formulating recommendations as to what should be said, written and conveyed to the media and in what manner, as well as giving outlines of crisis statements and templates for press disclaimers. In stressful situations, preparing such documents can be much more difficult. It is also easier to modify them if they are prepared calmly, rather than in stress and under great time pressure.

The crisis book document prevents panic and information paralysis, which are natural in difficult situations – especially in the first phase of the crisis, when roles are divided and somebody is labelled as a "bad guy" or "executioner". A crisis book and training of the management of a given entity and, if possible, of all employees, co-workers and volunteers helps to maintain a positive image of the institution or organization and public trust.

9. Rescue procedures

In addition to the crisis book, it is worth creating other procedures – regulations, ordinances and resolutions so that in smaller documents more detailed arrangements are specified and paths of conduct are created. The tools that will support handling the crisis will also include a crisis audit (a look at the existing procedures and an assessment of their effectiveness), the so-called crisis survival kit (a manual / instruction manual for all employees), e-crisis manual (instructions for employees on how to handle difficult situations in social media). It will be complementary to determine the way of marking the place of work in social media so that one does not generate crises for the institutions and organizations with one's activity, especially in the case of issues related to morality or teaching of the Church. It is also worth regulating this issue in the employment contract. Training and simulations are also useful in proactive crisis management. All of this supports the institution or organization in anticipating a crisis, prevents some of the crisis situations, and is an important part of proactive crisis management.

10. Communication in crisis

George Weigel in his book “The Courage to be Catholic. Crisis, Reform, and the Future of the Church,” published in the U.S. in 2002,¹⁸ emphasized the importance and need for skilful crisis management in the Church. This publication, devoted to the crisis related to numerous cases of paedophilia and homosexuality among clergy in the Catholic Church in the United States, is an analysis of the course of one of the greatest painful wounds for the Church in North America. Many people left the Church en masse at the time, and the sin of moral corruption continues to linger to this day.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) hired a public relations agency to manage the situation in the information realm. The agency undertook many activities to rebuild the image of the Church in the United States, and the result of many months of work by the agency was, among other

¹⁸ G. Weigel, *The Courage to be Catholic: Crisis, Reform and the Future of the Church*, New York 2002. In Polish: *Odwaga bycia katolikiem. Kryzys, reforma i przyszłość Kościoła*, Kraków 2004.

things, a professionally prepared media campaign called “Catholics Come Home.” The message of the campaign, which is especially visible on the website <http://www.catholicscomehome.org/> was divided into three sections – for those who are proud to be Catholic and want to help others to return to the Church, for those who do not attend Mass very often and for non-Catholics.

Crisis situations faced by the Church may result not only from the weaknesses of its members and the imperfection of its structures, although as research by PR centres on crises indicates – the majority of crisis situations originate from within the organisation. Therefore, crises are caused either by mistakes consisting of improper actions of the management, i.e. decision errors committed by them (improper decisions may be the cause of over 60% of all crises), or they are caused by the actions of employees (over 20%). Only about every seventh crisis (14%) is caused by external reasons.¹⁹

In 1975, Pope Paul VI wrote in his apostolic exhortation “*Evangelii nuntiandi*”²⁰ that it would be a sin of omission on the part of the Church not to use the means of social communication, which, “when put at the service of the Gospel, are capable of increasing almost indefinitely the area in which the Word of God is heard; they enable the Good News to reach millions of people. The Church would feel guilty before the Lord if she did not utilize these powerful means that human skill is daily rendering more perfect. It is through them that she proclaims “from the housetops” the message of which she is the depositary. In them she finds a modern and effective version of the pulpit. Thanks to them she succeeds in speaking to the multitudes” (No. 45).²¹ “These facts should certainly impel us to employ, for the purpose of transmitting the Gospel message, the modern means which this civilization has produced” (No. 42).²² Even

¹⁹ A. Łaszyn, *Komunikacja kryzysowa*, in: B. Biniszewski (ed.), *Sztuka public relations. Z doświadczeń polskich praktyków*, Warszawa 2006, p. 143.

²⁰ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi. Apostolic Exhortation to the Episcopate, to the Clergy and to all the Faithful of the Entire World* (8.12.1975), https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html (02.02.2022).

²¹ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi. Apostolic Exhortation to the Episcopate, to the Clergy and to all the Faithful of the Entire World* (8.12.1975), https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html (02.02.2022).

²² Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi. Apostolic Exhortation to the Episcopate, to the Clergy and to all the Faithful of the Entire World* (8.12.1975), https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html (02.02.2022).

in difficult situations, therefore, it is necessary to communicate. For especially then the opportunity for evangelization is threatened.

11. The practice of crisis management

Although John Paul II did not publish documents devoted to crisis management, he showed by his attitude and example how it should be realized in ecclesial practice. In his book “When the Pope Asks for Forgiveness. All the ‘mea culpa’ of John Paul II”²³ Luigi Accattolli includes 21 examples of the Polish Pope’s speeches and appeals for forgiveness to various nations, followers of other religions and social groups wronged in the history of the Church by this institution. During the more than one hundred pilgrimages John Paul II made, the word “I am sorry” was used many times, and the pursuit of reconciliation and concern for peace in the world were priorities for the Pilgrim Pope. John Paul II’s biographer George Weigel described it in interviews and books, including in his book “Witness of Hope.”²⁴ The Pope from Cracow used the media to solve crises.

Pope John Paul II stressed that the use of new discoveries and technologies is actually a duty of the people of the Church. This call, although written more than two decades ago, in the message for the XXIV World Communications Day in 1990, becomes particularly topical today, in the era of extraordinary technological development. Today, the Internet is used not only to obtain valuable information, expand our knowledge or fulfil our duties at work, but also (and perhaps above all) to communicate with other people.

12. Communication on the Web

More and more often users of the Internet and mobile devices, unable to see each other face to face (even for a short time), communicate using these devices, spending even as much as over a dozen hours a day on the Internet. Not only are they moving a significant part of their everyday communication with friends

²³ L. Accattoli, *Tutti i mea culpa di Giovanni Paolo II*, Milano 1997. In Polish: *Kiedy papież prosi o przebaczenie. Wszystkie mea culpa Jana Pawła II*, Kraków 1999.

²⁴ G. Weigel, *Witness to Hope. The Biography of Pope John Paul II*, New York 1999 (1st edition).

and family to the Internet, but it is there that they are beginning to spend a significant portion of their existence – communicating their worries, joys, sorrows, fears, experiences, and thoughts.

The times of electronic media and Internet communities are characterized by: speed of transmission, direct communication, partner treatment of each Internet user, without division into more important and less important ones, without hierarchization of users by their real status, but first of all by their achievements in the network (user activity).²⁵ The popularity of social networks may be a great chance to reach young users who log on for many hours and an extraordinary opportunity to proclaim the Good News about salvation, to evangelize where they live. However, such actions and messages need to be professionally prepared. Just like Noah started to build the ark before it started raining, he planned everything long before the flood, managed his resources, was prepared for the coming disaster. Any challenging social media activity needs to be prepared, coordinated, strategically planned and professionally crafted, tailored to the audience and well thought out. This is especially important in challenging situations that require an immediate response.

13. A paradigm shift in crisis communication

In today's communication context, social media play an important role in creating situations of communication tension. Quite often critical remarks appear in comments to publications, customers raise objections through social media, criticize procedures, inform about bad service, point out deficiencies in resources, provoke hate speech. If this happens locally, on a given fanpage, and the institution responds substantively, trying to resolve the situation, then after some time the criticism stops. Then these are only temporary difficulties. However, if mistakes are made at the stage of solving the situation, then we can already talk about a festival of mistakes, the crisis spreads to other channels of communication (antiprofiles are created on the same platform, the number of critical comments increases exponentially, opinion leaders, influential people and people working in the marketing and communication industry get interested

²⁵ A. J. Obe, M. Evans, I. Frank, D. Sharpling, *The Roman Catholic Church. Safeguarding in the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales. Investigation Report November 2020*, London 2020, p. 62, 91, 98, 117. Full text: <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/document/roman-catholic-church-investigation-report-november-2020> (02.02.2022).

in the situation), including the electronic media (radio, press, television, major online news portals), then we are dealing with a crisis. Until quite recently (about 10 years ago), the crisis communication management model was based on professional media. The mainstream media (news agency, daily or weekly press, TV or radio news programme) informed about an event or a problem. Then the crisis resonated to the largest television stations, professional online major news services and radio stations, then to newspapers, and finally to the general public, media consumers.²⁶ The mechanism of crisis management was based on the model of reaching the mainstream media, the information bottleneck, followed by subsequent links.

Today there has been a paradigm shift – in the mechanism of crisis emergence and management. Today's paradigm is the resonance of a person/media with a blog, microblog, alert service or other online space that reports on an event/problem. Information is brought to the second stage in two ways. First, professional media picks up the topic, similar to the existing communication model. The second track is independent resonance on the Net – the information lives its own life on blogs, microblogs, through amateur journalism, internet forums, community centres, social media groups, as a result of which the true and false information (fake news) exists side by side in the Google search engine. Through this two-way information flow, information reaches a wider audience. Monitoring the media and the activity of the company or institution in correcting information about its activities plays a key role in this circulation of information.

In a crisis mechanism based on professional media monitoring, catching outbreak points, it is important to reach most of the entities (never all of them) as quickly as possible and to perform many activities at the same time. Losses are always greater for the institution, company and environment than in the traditional model. Very often institutions do not have access to professional monitoring of social media and neglect the chances for a quick resolution of a crisis situation. In the context of the fragmented nature of the media, the institution's environment transfers its experience in managing information (incompetently) to the management of other resources and a situation requiring proactive action begins.

²⁶ J. Kłoch, M. Przybysz, *Medialny przekaz problematyki pedofilii w Kościele katolickim w Polsce*, "Symposium" 2 (2014) 27, pp. 93–112.

14. Credible communication

The credibility of a message increases when the communicator has authority. Pointing the blame outside the institution, especially without sensitivity to the wronged, not being sure where the cause of the crisis lies or not having the competence to assess it fully, is a classic bad attitude that lowers the credibility of subsequent statements, actions and correctly made decisions.

The principles that have been in place and proven for decades by commercial companies and corporations, tested at great expense, apply equally to all non-commercial entities, governmental, political, as well as to individuals. There is no deviation from them, as crises in today's world are determined by the media, not the entity or institution itself.

“Quick” does not always mean “right.” It is worth rethinking actions and decisions, because once taken – they must be communicated with unwavering consistency. However, waiting too long for the reaction of the institution of the Church, the lack of proper actions and responses may cause a decrease in trust in the institution, which we have been observing for several years in Poland. The costs of the crisis can always be and often actually are enormous as a result of communication errors of the subject. They concern finances, persons and time and grow with each day of lack of proper institutional actions.

15. Resolving a Crisis

One of the biggest crises in history that a contemporary crisis manager had to face was undoubtedly the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre. Robert Giuliani, mayor of New York City, had to face the crisis, including its communications side, since September 11, 2001. At press briefings, he always answered the questions “what we know,” emphasized “what we don't know,” accurately reported “what we have done and what we are doing” and “what we intend to do and what we plan to do.” This model – despite many difficulties – has become a benchmark for how a crisis can and should be tackled from the communications side. However, the decisions made during this crisis concerned specific activities and were properly communicated – the message itself without credible actions would very quickly be challenged. Previously, such attack scenarios in the form of hijacking a passenger plane and destroying a skyscraper building appeared only in science fiction movies. However, the mayor of the

city had to deal in quick succession with immense chaos, multiple challenges, trying to control the fires, saving lives and the immense suffering and lack of a management plan for such situations. However, in organizing thousands of activities and making many decisions, he made the decision to fully cooperate with journalists to be the intermediaries between relief services and millions of terrified Americans, and in conducting dozens of press conferences, he followed important principles in a crisis – as already mentioned above – always pointing out “a) what we know about the situation, b) what we don’t know, c) what we have done and are doing, d) what we intend and plan to do.” This largely brought the chaos under control at least in the information layer and proved effective in managing communications.

An important rule in solving the crisis in practice when dealing with journalists is also the reaction time – the maximum time within which response to the media must be given is 2 hours, and optimally this time should not exceed the “golden hour,” during which views are polarized and opinions are formed by people watching the event. In order to be able to do this in such a short period of time you need to be ready for certain specific actions beforehand. Comments can only be given by people who are designated and authorized to do so, who have high communication competence and are prepared to manage crisis communication. A coherent message is important.

In difficult situations, it is worth communicating only prepared, thought-out content. In such a situation, it is better to say “I don’t know” or “I’ll check it out,” than to make hot statements without checking and thinking, and to improvise. It is such statements that most often generate further problems, mistakes, and sometimes even serious legal, financial, social and image consequences.

In difficulties it is also important to be calm, polite, nice and avoid any manifestation of aggression. It is the aggressive attitude, expressions of impatience and bad emotions, especially towards the affected persons and media, that show lack of professionalism, desire to dominate, lack of control over the situation and bad attitude of crisis managers. If the crisis manager is not in control of his/her emotions and self, he/she is also not credible in managing other activities.

The last so-called “mandatory” is the rule of not saying anything on the so-called “off”. Some young reporters, after recording a statement, still ask for a private opinion on the matter, try to draw a slightly different opinion than they heard in the official and prepared statement, sometimes try to stretch the reality, and never completely turn off the recording equipment, even though

the light in the camera is not lit. Even when meeting on a “social footing” with a friendly journalist, it is also worth being very cautious when expressing one’s opinions off the record.

16. The 5Ps rule in solving a crisis²⁷

The business-proven and universal rules for creating crisis messages include: apologizing or expressing regret, admitting one’s mistake as soon as possible, taking action to prevent escalation of the crisis, improving the functioning of the institution or company itself, and compensating losses for particular groups in the environment. The key words that open many people’s hearts – sorry, please, thank you – always work. Showing respect to the recipients, journalists and all interested parties, humility instead of hypocrisy, the courage to face criticism, openness and 24/7 availability – these are golden rules practiced by many communicators. This business 5P rule is not alien to the Church because for centuries an almost identical principle has been in force for the Sacrament of Penance and the conditions of its validity: examination of conscience, contrition for one’s sins, strong determination to improve, sincere confession, reparation to God and neighbour. The most common communication mistakes in crisis situations include: avoiding answering questions, indecisiveness, accusing others, cynicism, aggressiveness, lack of empathy, evasive answers, arrogance.

17. Conclusions

We can divide crisis communication management into 3 important blocks. The first is preparation and prevention, that is proactive communication, preventing the occurrence of a crisis and difficult situation. The most important is such communication management that will prevent the occurrence of a crisis situation. Preparing for its occurrence by gathering pre-prepared press statements, as well as reading and analysing crisis statements of similar entities will be a great support in preparing for a crisis. Another issue is the creation of procedures

²⁷ A. Łaszyn et al., *e-Kryzys. Jak zarządzać sytuacją kryzysową w internecie*, Warszawa 2020, pp. 112–115.

of conduct, crisis simulations, writing down the established principles and rules of conduct in a crisis, giving authority to communicate, informing employees and colleagues about this, training.

The second block of crisis communication is to manage the situation in a reactive manner. In a crisis situation that has already arisen, it is necessary to communicate promptly but not too quickly; prudently and sensibly; creating ethical communication; adhering to the 5Ps principle; informing the public with consistency, courage and maturity in order to gain understanding, credibility and trust of the public.

Block three is learning from mistakes, implementing corrective actions, repairing and regenerating procedures, learning constructive lessons. Only such an approach in the spirit of openness and prudence, but knowing the rules of conduct, guarantees turning a crisis into a communication and management success for the institution. It is also a good way to prevent further crises, which will certainly affect the institution. Crisis situations are worth solving, as “there is nothing hidden that would not come to light, nor anything secret that would not become known. Therefore whatever you have said in the darkness will be heard in the light, and whatever you have whispered in the room will be proclaimed on the housetops” (Luke 12:2–3).

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